



# VIOLIN

## Teaching Etudes — The Value of an Orderly Approach

by Sally O'Reilly

A personal vignette: I am barely eight years old and have studied violin less than a year. My first teacher who set me up with great care, insisted on impeccable intonation and rhythm, and who had taken me through Wohlfahrt into Kayser, has just died. At his insistence my mother takes me to audition for the head of SMU's string department. I play a Seitz Concerto and a thoroughly prepared Kayser Etude. He is impressed and accepts me into his studio. But instead of continuing a plan that clearly works, he takes the book of etudes, tosses it onto the sofa next to my mother, and says, "Well, obviously we don't need *those* anymore." Result: Sally sees fewer than ten etudes in the ensuing eight years.

In the past, driven by my own experience as an etude-deprived student, I have climbed on my soapbox to extol the value of etudes in the process of developing strong violinists. Having recently completed the 2006 session of *Bravo!* at the university, I am back on that soapbox because of the variety of approaches to etude study, or the lack thereof, that I encountered while working with students from many studios throughout the country.

First, it was heartening to see students of my former students following a beneficial

regimen of scales, arpeggios, and etudes that complemented their repertoire. There were numerous students from our area's "tried and true" studios who arrived with similar plans of study. With all of these students it was possible simply to continue in the same direction, taking advantage of the intensity of summer study to (quoting Emeril) "kick it up a notch."

Second, it was frustrating to try to construct a solid course of study for the few students who came armed only with pieces. Assessing their abilities on the spot, with no prior knowledge, was a challenge, yet it was necessary if they were going to participate fully in the technic classes that are an intrinsic part of *Bravo!*'s curriculum.

There were other students who had standard etude books in which etudes seemed to have been assigned willy-nilly with no discernable goals in mind. I admit that I have my favorites in every volume of etudes from Wohlfahrt to Dont Opus 35, and I look forward to my students' reaching those etudes in their course of study. I also confess that I dread Kreutzer No. 23 because of the unmeasured runs, which I refer to as "musical spaghetti." But I recognize the value of this etude because it stands alone in the repertoire as an opportunity to teach students

how to measure those amorphous strings of notes, practice them with the metronome, and increase the speed to a virtuosic level so that when they encounter similar runs in Vieuxtemps, Saint-Saens, and the like, their eyes don't glaze over because they know how to practice them.

I vividly recall Josef Gingold's insistence that violin pedagogues including Kreutzer, Rode, and Dont, had gone to the trouble of organizing their etudes in the most beneficial order possible and that teachers would be wise not to tamper with them. Ivan Galamian's students learned every note of every Gaviniès etude, profiting from endless extensions and sequences in upper positions that simply aren't found in heavy concentrations in other etude books.

We have a rich collection of violin etudes and an obligation not only to assign them to our students on a weekly basis, but to hear them in their lessons as well, remembering that what we don't hear will never be practiced!

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